Interview with Charles F. Baldwin

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR CHARLES F. BALDWIN

Interviewed by: Kenneth Colton

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Q: I was really quite impressed by your varied services. You were in Georgetown, and you graduated in 1927?

BALDWIN: 1926.

Q: When I was going to college in the '30's, Georgetown was highly regarded as the entr# post for Foreign Service officers. It struck me that you might have aimed for the Foreign Service, in going to Georgetown. Was that something that came as a purpose, or as a consequence of opportunity?

BALDWIN: It came deliberately. I had planned to go to Princeton—my family wanted me to go to Princeton. As a small boy growing up I had no particular ambitions. Then we went to Washington, and I met one or two people who were interested in the Foreign Service. In fact, we had a camp up the river, and one of my tent-mates was going to a place called the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, which I had never heard of. I went in his tent one night, and he began to talk to me about how important it was for America to become an exporting nation. This was in the post-war period, when we were beginning to be exporters. Our goods were in great demand all over the world, and the Foreign

Service was growing—burgeoning. He talked and talked; I think he talked till 2 o'clock in the morning.

My family was living in the city of Washington and I was camping up the river. I went home and announced to my family that I thought I'd matriculate at Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. They said, “What's that?”

I explained it to them, and I went down to Georgetown the next day and talked with a man named Healy, who was the dean. While I was in his office I signed the papers, and the upshot of it was that I became a student at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service.

Q: That's so consistent with my experience. I went to school up in Massachusetts, and I know the appeal of Georgetown was exactly on that level. The thing that strikes me about your career, Mr. Ambassador, is that it was so strongly in economics. You graduated in '26. I have no knowledge of your career before—let's see, 1946 you went to Santiago, and then you went to Oslo. Then you went to Trieste, and so forth. Oh, the war came along, that's right.

BALDWIN: I was in the war. I was in the Navy for five years.

Q: Were you overseas much of that time?

BALDWIN: I was overseas. When I got into the Navy I didn't know anything about the Navy, or where I would go, or what I would go. But I had a reserve commission, and I volunteered for active duty. I went down to get my mobilization assignment, and I found out I was in a thing called Coastal Intelligence. I didn't have the slightest idea what coastal intelligence was, and curiously enough, I couldn't find anybody that could tell me. I had a friend at the British Embassy, and I told him one day about this dilemma—that I had a military war-time assignment, but I didn't know what it was all about. He said, “Write to the admiral.” [He suggested,] “We've got something like that, and maybe he'll give you a hint from the British experience.”

So he came back and said that the British had had the same experience in the First World War, and they'd gone into something called Coastal Intelligence. And that had become Operational Intelligence, serving the naval operating forces. Again to my amazement, I found myself called in to the office of the Director of Naval Intelligence in Washington. He said, “Baldwin, we are creating a new unit called Operational Intelligence. We want you to be in charge of it.”

I said, “What do I do?”

He said, “I haven't the slightest idea.”

There I was, left again with a title but nothing to do. I had an office in the old Navy building in Washington, with a yeoman, and a typewriter, and that was the Naval Operational Intelligence. I built it up and created units in the various states where there were naval establishments. It became quite an activity, and still is.

Q: I was interested in that experience in the naval service—whether that gave you a further exercise or opportunity to experience overseas problems—aside from the war itself. We used to say that the Navy is probably more liberal than the army because it has foreign contacts and sees various peoples, presumably the references to the officers in the Navy. I just wondered if your experience in the Navy had given you further opportunity to exercise your interest in the foreign nations?

BALDWIN: Undoubtedly. The Navy is foreign service, and I was in one aspect of foreign service. I became very much interested in foreign affairs, and the logical development of that was to go into the Foreign Service.

Q: Your first posting was in Santiago, I believe in 1946?

BALDWIN: Actually, I'd had a tour of duty in Australia before that.

Q: With the Department?

BALDWIN: With the Foreign Commerce Service. I was a trade commissioner—an assistant trade commissioner—in Australia. It was very new in those days. You may remember that these were the days when Herbert Hoover was Secretary of Commerce. Herbert Hoover created in the Department of Commerce a Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. It was his idea. The idea was to have a unit in the Department of Commerce that would specialize in foreign trade. They began to look around and recruit people to work in this Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. They ran across me and offered me a job in the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, which I accepted.

Q: Was that during the war, or before the war?

BALDWIN: It was before the war.

Q: If you were in the Commerce Department—there were such a thing—I was not a Foreign Service officer at any time, but I did have an acquaintance who was a commercial attach# years ago. He happened to have been posted to China. Now that was a commercial attach# in the Department of Commerce, was it not?

BALDWIN: That's right. Those jobs, commercial attach# and economic counselor. Commercial attach# was a functional job; the economic counselor was a diplomatic one. The general [idea] was to go into the foreign commerce as an assistant commercial attach#.

So I went to Sydney, Australia, as an assistant commercial attach#. My boss out there, who was a counselor, didn't have the slightest idea what he was getting, who this newcomer was, or what he was supposed to do; and nor did I. I really, in a way, pioneered the job. I was made a commercial attach#, and then later I was transferred to London,

which was an embassy. And there I was given diplomatic status, and called an economic counselor.

Q: This was before you were posted at Santiago?

BALDWIN: Yes.

Q: Your career strikes me as really very unusual, perhaps because I am not familiar with the pattern of the Foreign Service. You covered continents! Australia, Santiago, and Latin areas, then Oslo, and Northern Europe, and Trieste, and Southern Europe!

BALDWIN: That's right. It was a very limited service in those days. Herbert Hoover created this thing, and then as you know, he didn't last very long—he became President and died. The Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce continued to go on and develop, but I sort of lost contact with it actually.

Q: It seems to me that this was before the war, because it had to be . . .

BALDWIN: Yes, it was before the war.

Q: And you moved directly into the Foreign Service itself, when you went to Santiago?

BALDWIN: That's right.

Q: And you were posted there in a consulate?

BALDWIN: We were independent; we were supposed to cooperate with the consulate, but we were not in the consulate. I had a little office of my own, in Sydney. I created a little office of my own, and a little staff of my own, and I built up the job as I conceived it—what I thought I was supposed to do. In those days, what I was supposed to do was really be a traveling salesman. Those were the days when American business companies were beginning to establish branches abroad, with export managers. They hadn't had export

managers before. These export managers wanted help, of course. I conceive it, as one of my functions, to give them help. So I found myself going around Sydney, Australia, and actually pedaling American products, as a government official!

Q: This was the experience my friend had in Asia. You also—when you were in Santiago —Santiago is Chili?

BALDWIN: Chili.

Q: You were an economic officer there, and when you went to Oslo and Trieste were your assignments also economic?

BALDWIN: Yes, they were under the commerce depart-ment, and I was commercial attach# in Norway. While I was in Norway they expanded—they brought the things together, in Washington. They'd have commercial attach#s, and then you'd “fleet up,” as they say in the Navy, to counselor. There you'd have diplomatic status.

While I was in Oslo, I went down to Paris one day and went to the embassy, and the ambassador swore me in as the economic counselor.

Q: Then you went to Trieste. You were then in the diplomatic cone of the State Department. Were you in economic affairs there, as well?

BALDWIN: In Trieste I was the office, the whole thing. That was the first time I was; it was my first experience as really being a fecund ambassador, without the title. I set up my office there with an economic section, a political section, and an administrative section—just as you do in an embassy.

Q: In noting your posting to Trieste and so forth, this was a period when we had the Czechoslovakian crisis. The Marshall Plan came in '48. And you had the controversy—Jimmy Burns, I believe, was Secretary of State at the time—of how to manage Germany,

the East of Germany and the West of Germany. Did any of that international tension ripple into your operations in Trieste?

BALDWIN: Yes, it did. My office in Trieste—I was the second [officer] in Trieste. There was a man ahead of me. He was the first [officer], that went there. I succeeded him. It bordered Yugoslavia, which in those days was a hostile nation. We were sort of guests in Italy at the time, because the Italians were claiming Trieste to be part of Italy, and the Yugoslavs were saying no. It was a hot spot, and you had bomb throwing, and other things to make life exciting. I was there.

There was a rapprochement worked out in Washington, with the Secretary of State, whereby Trieste would become part of Italy. Yugoslavia took violent exception to this. I used to make occasional trips from Trieste, down into Yugoslavia. I was received with diplomatic correctness, but not much friendliness.

Q: Were your functions there primarily political?

BALDWIN: No, they weren't. I functioned, in Trieste, very much the same way an economic counselor functions in an embassy—except I had no ambassador. I was the number one. So I did whatever needed to be done. If a company in Houston, Texas wanted an agent in Trieste, or in that part of Italy, they'd write to me and I would make the necessary connections. If, on the other hand, there was a political development in Yugoslavia, I would cover that. That brought me in the orbit of the State Department.

Q: You were really in a [vacuum] there.

BALDWIN: I was for a while.

Q: This was just about the time when we had the Article X in foreign affairs. Italy was a turmoil, and there was a great deal of leftist pressure, and the Voice of America was

sending postcards over there. It would seem to me that you must been involved in quite a bit of liaison with other departments?

BALDWIN: I was it; I was a one-man show. And these things had repercussions; a bomb went off in my front yard one day, in Trieste. I picked up a bomb one morning in the dining room, as I was having breakfast; fortunately it was not set to go off. That kind of thing happened in those days.

Q: You didn't have any CIA. Of course, they were established in the National Security Act of 1947; they probably didn't have anybody posted in your place at that time?

BALDWIN: No, they didn't. Whatever was done, I was doing.

Q: I want to move into an area which I believe was one of your major careers, in Southeast Asia. I believe you went to Singapore in about 1951.

BALDWIN: That's right.

Q: Singapore in 1951—was that in the days when David Marshall was active already? Was he there when you arrived?

BALDWIN: Yes, he was there.

Q: You got there in '49?

BALDWIN: Yes. He was beginning to be quite some-thing.

Q: You were a consul general there, I believe.

BALDWIN: Not to begin with; I was a vice-consul to start with. Then I went up to consul, and eventually to consul general.

Q: And your game plan that you followed in Singapore—what targets did the game plan aim to achieve? What goal line were they trying to cross? I just assume—not being a State Depart-ment person—that you have certain requirements as to what you hope to accomplish in an overseas assignment. Did the State Department work like that, at the time that you were there?

BALDWIN: Yes. Unfortunately you are catching me at a disadvantage now, because I've been out of this business a very long time, as you know. This is literally the first occasion I've had to try to recall some of these things. I find it pleasant and interesting, but somewhat disconcerting when I find my memory failing.

Q: I don't know much details of Southeast Asia. I know more about Japan. But Singapore—you were there 1951. Then you went back to the Department. You were the Deputy Secretary?

BALDWIN: Deputy Secretary of State, for the Far East. My title was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs.

Q: I think I read somewhere—Mr. Kennedy gave me information—that there was an economic coordinator of the Far East, or did you cover the whole thing?

BALDWIN: I was Economic Coordinator for the Far East. Again, these titles—I used to wonder who in the world ever concocted them. I never quite knew what I was supposed to coordinate. Malaya, of course, was a part of the British empire; then it became part of the [Malaysian Federation].

Q: So was Singapore. You were there until '54, in Singapore. That would be in the transition to Eisenhower's administration, and Foster Dulles became Secretary of State. I'm always interested in information that might be useful to people in the Service, about how your work as a coordinator involved patterns, or relations, or even problems, or

solutions that came through. Were you coordinating with other branches of the State Department?

BALDWIN: I asked for clarification of my status there, as there was a consul general at the time. He was a very senior consular officer. He looked askance, to say the least, at this young upstart who came out there into his territory and started an office on Bond Street, in Sydney, Australia, and began to function.

I went out of my way to be very correct. I called on him and explained to him what I believed I was supposed to be out there to do. In those days there was a consular set-up there, to handle the political end of it. And my job, as I could tell, was largely to [promote] American business, which is what I did most of the time.

Q: Are you referring to the time when you had the title of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State?

BALDWIN: No, this was before.

Q: Your period of service as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State was an extremely interesting period.

BALDWIN: It was a very interesting period, and it was a very interesting experience, because—again—Washington, as you know, has a pretty well entrenched bureaucracy. Anything Herbert Hoover did was never regarded with great joy by some of the people in Washington.

Q: You were Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, as a coordinator. About that time you were also part of the negotiating team for Philippine negotiations, in 1954.

BALDWIN: Yes.

Q: I think of this as the Laurel Negotiations.

BALDWIN: That's what they were called—the Laurel Negotiations.

Q: My wife and I were in Japan, at that time, and I stopped in Manila in '54. I attended a meeting in which there was something that was related to these negotiations. I may have seen you, but I would never have known it.

BALDWIN: I was at that meeting, as I recall.

Q: That was the year in which SEATO was established, I believe.

BALDWIN: I believe so, yes.

Q: And the Korean War was on. And Mao was riding high and fancy in China. And David Marshall was a real power in Singapore.

BALDWIN: A real power in Singapore.

Q: And you had the difficulties—the emergency had already begun in Malaysia. I knew the Philippines—not intimately—but a little more than casually. I always thought of the Philippines as the American model experiment in democracy in Asia. We used to consider it a remarkable success, because it was a stable democracy.

BALDWIN: Yes, I remember those days.

Q: Was the aim of the Laurel-Langley Agreement to resolve a tenseness? Was it to help Malaya? Was it to remedy the Bell Act? Right after the end of the war there was an economic agreement, that the Philippines did not like. Was there any special importance to the Laurel-Langley Agreement, or was it just good public relations diplomacy?

BALDWIN: So far as I can recall, it was the latter. Do you remember Tunku?

Q: Yes.

BALDWIN: Well, when I was in Malaya Tunku was in power, and I did my best. I had known him when I was out there before. I had known him slightly. I did get along very well with him. When I was out there before I gave a reception, one day, and I was looking at the guest list. I came across this little Malaya prince—Tunku Abdul Rahman. I told my secretary to send an invitation to him. To my amazement he came down, dressed in his formal Malay—and came to my reception. I was a little bit taken aback. In any event, Tunku never forgot that. When I went back years later, he welcomed me with open arms. And all the time I was there he was a great help to me, because it facilitated my contacts out there, tremendously. For a long time I had the inside track on what was going on—including the relations with the Philippines.

I will never forget one day. Tunku was a great golfer, and there was a very good golf course right outside the official American residence. I was playing golf with him one day, and suddenly he slammed his club down, and said, “Why don't you make those bloody beggars [leave]?”

And I said, “What 'bloody beggars are you talking about?”

He said, “Those Philippine bastards.”

That was the time the tensions were beginning to develop. And you had the confrontation.

Q: In Indonesia? The Federation? There was Maphilindo. There was a dispute over one of the islands between Indonesia.

Your period in the State Department, as Deputy Assistant Secretary—you were there from '54 to '61. That was quite an extended home tour. Was this because of the problems—they were very serious and needed your experience?

BALDWIN: I think so, I really do. I think it just happened that my experience fit the need at the time. I can't think of any other reason.

Q: Then when you got to Malaysia, as ambassador, the emergency had really ended in 1960. But there were still some problems. Were you involved? This was when they began to move toward developing the Malaysia Federation, with [Singapore], and created the differences with Indonesia. Was this your main problem?

BALDWIN: Yes, by any measure at all. I was up to my ears in that, all the time. It was very difficult, and sometimes a little dangerous. It was fascinating to me, because it was of very major importance.

Q: Did you find it was very important for you to have the support of your colleagues? For instance, you were down there in 1961, and Jack Kennedy's Presidency developed the overseas diplomatic corps—sort of a country team aspect. The ambassador was the number 1. I used to tell my students it was like a little cabinet overseas. I wondered if you found this to be the way you operated, and how successful it was, Ambassador.

BALDWIN: I think it was successful. Those things are successful, depending on the individuals that do them. If they want them to succeed, they succeed; if they don't want them to they don't. It seems a ridiculous oversimplification, but it really isn't. My arrangements worked out very well, very harmoniously, and very comfortably.

Q: I used to have a friend who was in one of the intelligence arms of the government. He used to tell me that in one of the hotels in Singapore, he'd go there to dinner and could tell this guy was the agent of this guy etc. Did you have much of that?

BALDWIN: There was a lot of that.

Q: Did you have much problem with the expanding role given to the CIA, after the Korean period?

BALDWIN: It did spill over, but I had no problems at all; because the representative from the CIA—it was an officer of mine—and he'd been doing my intelligence work. He had

one foot in the CIA, and the other . . . The one in the CIA wasn't supposed to be known. In those days that was very confidential. But he knew me very well, and I never had any trouble with him at all. I could have, because of the material in those days; there could have been a lot of very serious trouble. But I never had any trouble with this man. We worked on our problems together. If he had to do something he was a little leery about, he would come an talk to me about it. On a few occasions he went back to the CIA and said “I won't do this.” I had agreed with him, it was not the thing to do. We had that kind of working relation-ship.

I never had anything but the very closest, and most pleasant relations with the CIA.

Q: With your extensive experience with the Commerce Department—as Commercial Attach# and the like—I would imagine that you also got along very well with the other agencies of the government?

BALDWIN: I was remarkably problem free.

Q: I wonder if you ever thought that your pleasure in serving in Malaysia was a product of the fact that you had served in Singapore? This was a tremendous asset for the Department.

BALDWIN: No doubt about it. I have often wondered to what extent I was sent out there because of it—because someone had foresight enough to see this. But it was of great help to me, that I knew all these people. [Tunku] I saw a great deal of him. Tunku was really a close friend. These things were invaluable to me.

Q: You just speculated on the question in my mind—whether your appointment was based on the fact that—if you're moving toward a Malaysian Federation with Singapore, with Malaysia itself—it was the right choice. Because there was obviously going to be difficulty getting these two parts together.

BALDWIN: I always felt that's probably the reason I did get appointed, yes.

Q: What did you think was the problem of Singapore opting out of the Malaysian Federation? Was this a fear of the Chinese influence?

BALDWIN: Yes, 80%. They never could being together the discordant elements of Malaysia, and China. I worked on that. I talked to Tunku about it. We worked on plan, after plan, after plan. I talked to Lee Kuan Yew; he was a Nationalist Chinese—as you know. He was a very able man in many ways. But it was a very difficult thing.

Q: I guess it was almost inevitable. Then you had another problem, besides Lee Kuan Yew. You had your very good neighbor—Sukarno made a lot of trouble for you while you were there. You were there from '61 to '64; this was that confrontation period. It seems to me your appointment there was clearly opportune, in terms of your background. Now the problems that arose were political.

BALDWIN: That's right, and I'm not a political expert. Maybe that helped. [Sukarno] was a very amazing man. I knew him, and when I went to Indonesia I would invariably call on him. He was always very pleasant with me. He hated Tunku and he knew that I was very close to him. He had his abilities, too.

Q: This was a very important post; you were juggling a lot of balls in the air. You had Brunei, which opted out of the Federation. I guess this was purely the Brunei sultan; he didn't want to pay the high tax being levied on the Federation?

BALDWIN: That's right—I think that had something to do with it. These things—I was involved in all of them, but in a peripheral way. My previous experience was very helpful to me.

Q: The British were feeling pressure on their extended empire.

BALDWIN: Oh yes.

Q: I don't know when they began to pull out of Singapore, but that must have been the handwriting on the wall—about the time you were there.

BALDWIN: It was, and again one of my jobs—I suppose the second. The first of my jobs, by importance, was cultivating my ties with Tunku; and after that it was developing public relations with the British. The handwriting on the wall made it very clear that they were finished there. They didn't want to be. One of the most able British that I knew was Malcolm McDonald, clearly. He saw the handwriting on the wall very clearly. And he worked at a time when it was very unpopular in London for him to do this. He worked to bring about a rapprochement and understanding. I had a great deal of respect for Malcolm. I think in many ways he was a truly great man.

Q: To what degree was your relationship with your home office either a positive, or if you were to write a prescription for any change, what would you write?

BALDWIN: I had very good relations in the Department. And I came to the conclusion that the nature of those relations depended on the nature of the people involved. If the people involved wanted the system to work properly it would; if they didn't—human nature came into it in a very important way, and would spoil the whole thing.

Q: Would you, therefore, suggest, Mr. Ambassador, that appoint-ing people at that level is where you really have to look into the chemistry involved?

BALDWIN: Absolutely.

Q: The person should never be appointed, at that level, who's going to be a frictionist, feisty, and ego tripping. Apparently you were very successful in your interpersonal relations. I'm quite impressed by the fact that you have sighted the importance of the individual coping with his job—wanting to do it right, and being accommodating.

BALDWIN: I think that is the essence of the whole thing.

Q: You came to the end of your service in Malaysia, I believe, in '64. On the basis of your experience there, did you see a developing of the Southeast Asian Association?

BALDWIN: It started, really, toward the end of my tour of duty. I thought it was a very good thing; important to the new countries—some of them antagonistic to each other. All of them had to be there because they were part of that geographic area. I thought anything that would coordinate them and bring them together, and develop better working relationships, was good; and that was the intended purpose. It worked some of the time, and some of the time it didn't—again, depending on the nature of the people.

Q: It would seem to me that the Department would be quite disposed to listen to you? Did you feel that your role, and your experience, was a factor?

BALDWIN: Yes, I think so. When I went back to the Department, after this happened, I was able to check on various incidents in which I was involved. And I found out, to my pleasure, that I had a certain impact. I didn't do everything that I wanted, but people did listen. It wasn't evident where I was, from that remote distance.

Q: Did you ever feel that you were far enough out and that you were independent—that they gave you a lot of free leash?

BALDWIN: I certainly did. I think everybody in that position—no matter what part of the world—the more free leash you had the better you like it. That, of course, caused a lot of friction. If you had somebody in the Department that decided he was going to tell these people what to do, that was the beginning of trouble.

Q: About that time, in the '60's, you had some ambassadors in Vietnam, and in Laos, Cambodia. Occasionally, there used to be regional conferences, I believe. Sometimes in the Philippines. I think there was a chap by the name of Parsons, at one time, that was

ambassador up in Laos. Kennedy had a non-Foreign Service officer as ambassador in Thailand.

BALDWIN: The three of us—his wife didn't come along, she had something else to do—we were house guests. Ed and I, and my wife, went for a walk. I don't know how well you know the Japanese—they march almost in a military fashion. The minute they say Ed Reischauer, they [bow]. They had such respect for him.

Q: My last question, Mr. Ambassador, is about language. When you were in Singapore, or in Malaysia, did you find a need to acquire a language facility to communicate? Or would you have English speakers in all your contacts? In Singapore, and perhaps in Malaysia, you had the Chinese legacy of immigrants. Some people have divided the Chinese between the traditionalists and the adapters. Did you find a problem of Chinese Communist influence a pervasive, troubling factor when you were down in Singapore?

BALDWIN: Yes.

Q: After the emergency ended this was a problem in Malaysia, too, wasn't it?

BALDWIN: It was indeed. It was a major fear in that whole area. I used to talk to Malcolm McDonald by the hour about it; about what to do to build up a defense against this.

End of interview